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Kevlihan, Robert

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Designing Social Inquiry in Central Asia – A Case Study of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan

Robert Kevlihan*

Abstract

Central Asia offers a potential smorgasbord for researchers engaged in comparative analysis. Common shared characteristics of these states have provided and continue to provide opportunities for advances in our understanding of political and social phenomena of global importance, including state building, democratisation, nationalism and economic development. However, in conducting comparative case study research in Central Asia, researchers should be aware of the strengths and weaknesses of different comparative approaches. This article reviews and critiques one approach to comparative analysis that has become increasingly dominant in social science research, particularly in the US. Comparing events in two Central Asian countries during 2005, a period of heightened risk of colour revolution, the article highlights both strengths and weaknesses of this increasingly dominant approach, arguing instead for a more inclusive and pragmatic approach to comparative analysis both in Central Asia and to case study comparisons more generally as the best way to advance our understanding of important social and political phenomena.¹

Keywords: comparative politics, research design, Central Asia, democratisation, Colour Revolutions.

Introduction

The book *Designing Social Inquiry* (King, Keohane & Verba, 1994), hereafter DSI, has become perhaps one of the most influential texts in teaching methodology in the field of comparative politics, particularly in the US. As an example of its ubiquity, an internet search using the title of the book, author names and the key words 'Course Syllabus' resulted in almost 400 hits, the majority of which reference course syllabi, mainly in classes taught in US universities.² Described by Brady and Collier (2004) as a 'homily', DSI makes a forceful and uncompromising argument that its approach to the design of research projects is the only approach that can produce valid inferences in comparative politics.

* E-mail: rkevlihan@gmail.com

1 The idea for this article arose as a result of a teaching seminar on the application of the comparative method to Central Asia presented at the Bilim / Central Asian Resource Centre in Almaty, Kazakhstan, in April 2008 and a research seminar presented on color revolutions in comparative perspective presented at the Kazakhstan Institute for Management, Economics and Strategic Research (KIMEP) in February 2009. The author would especially like to acknowledge the kind support of the late director of Bilim, Galina Bitukova, in presenting the teaching seminar, as well as contributions made by others in conversation and discussion that have influenced the content of this paper, including Patrick Thaddeus Jackson, Peter M. Lewis, Julie Mertus, William Reno, Steve Silvia, Fatemeh Ghobti, Jiri Melich, Nargis Kassenova, Ustina Marcus, Amri Sherzamonov, Mark Hamilton, Donnacha Ó Beacháin and Abel Polese. All views expressed are those of the author and do not represent the views of any government, agency or organization.

2 Per search conducted on www.google.com, 24th March 2013, using the following search parameters: King Keohane Verba 'Designing Social Inquiry' 'Course Syllabus'. Readers are encouraged to replicate this search and review the results to get a sense of the extent to which this text features in a variety of course syllabi.

Drawing inspiration from the work of political philosopher John Stuart Mills, this approach takes its design imperative from quantitative approaches to comparison that use a large number of independent observations to identify relationships between variables through the use of statistical methods. Such models assume a closed system where control variables remain static or can be controlled using mathematical techniques, while variation is measured based on an analysis of independent and dependent variables. For comparativists of this tradition, the assumption of unit homogeneity shapes research design decisions. It is also assumed that the impact of independent and control variables will be the same in all circumstances within the domain under investigation (Jackson, 2008, pp. 136-137). Theory construction, from what ultimately is a falsificationist perspective (Jackson, 2008; Popper, 1970; Popper, 1972), occurs in advance of the testing of such theories. This comparative framework is largely intended as a method to prove or disprove theories against the cases under consideration (Przeworski & Teune 1970; King et al. 1994; King et al. 2004; Lijphart 1971). The popularity of this approach in teaching the next generation of researchers brings with it some risks. Principle among these risks is that comparative politics (particularly, perhaps in the US) may become bound and limited by a single dominant positivist paradigm – a paradigm that uses quantitative methods based on a large number of randomly selected observations as the basis for qualitative comparison using a much smaller number of comparative cases.³

This article illustrates some of the potential opportunities and pitfalls of utilising this approach to research through the application of the model to Central Asia. Drawing on existing research related to the diffusion of colour revolutions in the region, it utilises DSI's approach to better understand political contention in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan in the Spring of 2005.⁴ In doing so, the piece illustrates some of the challenges and opportunities of utilising this approach as one tool among many in the comparativist toolkit, rather than as the only tool to be used.

Designing Social Inquiry in Central Asia

Small case comparison is first and foremost a basis for middle range theory building: theory that aims for parsimony and generalisation but appreciates the need to confront empirical reality (Zibblatt, 2006, p. 8). Central Asia has often been treated as a suitable context for such comparative analysis by social scientists.⁵ Studies examining all or a sub-set of the five Central Asian states (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan) implicitly or explicitly assume that such comparisons are appropriate because of the shared characteristics of Central Asian states. All five countries were part of the Soviet Union and, as a consequence, have similar social, cultural and economic endowments from that period. In the pre-Soviet period, all five drew to a greater or lesser extent from a common Central Asian culture. All are Muslim majority states and all five became independent at relatively short notice and were not amongst the vanguard in the break-up of the Soviet Union. Finally, all five have experienced (again, to greater or lesser extents) authoritarian or semi-authoritarian governance in the post-Soviet period. Considered in combination, such commonalities offer researchers ample

³ Indeed, concerns regarding the adoption of approaches drawn from statistical methods also raises broader concerns. As Barkin (2007, p. 756) comments, the application of this quantitative focus to other research approaches also risks 'importing a norm that how you study politics is more important than what you study'.

⁴ This piece is primarily focused on the application of this research design to a natural experiment identified in Central Asia, in order to illustrate DSI design principles in action. It draws from already available research and does not present new fieldwork.

⁵ See, for example, work on clan politics by Kathleen Collins (1999, 2002, 2003, 2004, 2006), on political institutions by Pauline Luong (2002), studies of Islam in the region (Haghighyeghi, 1996; Khalid, 2007), on authoritarianism (Kubicek, 1998; Laruelle & Peyrouse, 2006), on civil society (Ruffin & Vaughn 1999; Sievers 2003; Turam 2004), on state formation (Menon & Spruyt, 1998) and economic development (Rumer & Zhukov, 1998), to cite but a few studies among many.

bases for justifying comparison using standard comparative methodologies. An examination of the appropriateness of this increasingly hegemonic model to Central Asia is, therefore, warranted, in my view, because of the potential attractiveness of the region from a standard comparative perspective.⁶

How would this model be applied in practice? Taking an example from Central Asia, this article will consider the impact of diffusion processes related to colour revolutions in 2005 on Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan using this standard comparative framework. This comparison offers an even tighter comparison than the typical region-wide comparisons discussed above because it relates to only two of the five countries in the region, and, as we shall see, compares events surrounding electoral processes in these two countries that inadvertently occurred in close sequence with each other.

Case comparison: Colour revolutions in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan

Since 1998 Eastern Europe and the post-Soviet states of the CIS have seen something of a 'fourth wave' (Huntington, 1991; McFaul, 2002) of so-called revolutions, whose intent has been to initiate processes of political change within the affected states. Dubbed 'colour revolutions' these episodes were largely comprised of short, sharp bursts of (largely non-violent) contentious politics aimed at the replacement of incumbent governments.⁷ These episodes are generally grouped together because of the use of similar symbolic appeals and mobilisation techniques by opposition groups (McAdam, Tarrow, & Tilly, 2001).⁸⁹ Colour revolutions follow previous patterns of contentious politics, where social movements present similar combinations of campaign methods and repertoires (Tilly, 2004). Much of the diffusion of forms of contention that has occurred can be understood as arising because of both demonstration effects of successful episodes and deliberate programmatic efforts by knowledge brokers to transfer 'lessons learned' from one context to another. These processes represent a combination of programmatic effects and imitation with a heavy focus on elite learning (Bessinger, 2007).¹⁰

6 While the pitfalls of this standard approach have been critiqued in general terms elsewhere – see, for example (Brady & Collier, 2004; Jackson, 2011), to my knowledge, they have not been discussed with reference to comparisons in Central Asia. Given the close similarity of these states on many criteria, such an application represents a useful contribution to existing literature generally, and is of particular interest to those interested in studying political and social phenomena in the Central Asian region and former Soviet Union more generally. Similar issues may also be of relevance to comparative studies in other regions of the world. Francophone countries in the African Sahel, including Senegal, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger and Chad, for example, present a similar comparative smorgasbord as that provided by Central Asia for similar reasons – similarity of pre-colonial and colonial experiences, achievement of independence around the same time and similar ecological zones (all are located on the east-west Sahel axis) and (at least in the parts of these countries classified as within the Sahel) have Muslim majority populations.

7 As revolutions go, these episodes were generally relatively tame affairs. In her seminal work on the subject, Theda Skocpol (1980) defined a social revolution as a "rapid transformation of a society's state and class structures" that is accompanied and in part carried out by class-based revolts from below. There are two critical elements to this definition – a simultaneous social and political transformation and the presence of a popular uprising rather than elite bargaining resulting in a hand-over of power (Himmelstein & Kimmel, 1981, p. 1145). Colour revolutions typically lacked this scope of change as a unifying theme, and instead, where successful led to elite turnover through popular uprising, rather than radical change. See also Ó Beacháin and Polese (2010), particularly pp6-11 for a further discussion on same.

8 Such sequences are not new. The use of the liberty cap as a symbol of protest has been highlighted by Tilly (2004, p. 30, 2005, pp. 220-221), for example. Derived from the Roman period when it was used to designate liberated slaves, it was later used by the Dutch to represent their liberation from Spain and subsequently borrowed by the English during upon the accession of William of Orange to the throne (1688-1689). Later it was adopted by Irish rebels in 1798 in their struggle against the British.

9 For further discussions on color revolutions in general, see McFaul (2002), Beissinger (2007), Tucker (2007) and Ó Beacháin and Polese (2010).

10 See also, Diamond (1999) for a more general discussion of democratisation processes.

Circumstances in Central Asia in 2005 offer a potentially interesting natural experiment on the impact of this diffusion wave utilising the standard comparative approach. It was a tumultuous year for the region, with four of the five Central Asian states – the exception being Turkmenistan – touched to greater or lesser degrees by violence and actual or potential political contention.¹¹

The events of February and March 2005 are of particular interest because of the close (and inadvertent) sequencing of elections in the neighbouring countries of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan (see below). In Kyrgyzstan, protests in the wake of these elections, beginning in March 2005, culminated in the ousting of the country's leader, Askar Akiev. In Tajikistan, the elections went off relatively peacefully, with the incumbent President, Emomali Rahmon, retaining power.

On the face of it, the risks of street protests should have been at least as high in Tajikistan as in Kyrgyzstan in early 2005. Both Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan are relatively resource poor countries, and as such, governments in these states are less well endowed economically to maintain regime stability. In addition, by coincidence, electoral cycles in Tajikistan happened to be closely synchronized with those of Kyrgyzstan in 2005. The period of contentious politics began in Kyrgyzstan in March 2005, while parliamentary elections in Tajikistan were in process – having been conducted in two stages on February 27th and then March 13th, 2005. This coincidence is noteworthy in two respects – first, because mobilising public responses to election results appears to be an important component of successful contentious episodes of colour revolutions (Tucker, 2007), and second, because in both cases the elections were plagued by voting irregularities. In looking at these and other factors, I have argued elsewhere (Kevlihan & Sherzamonov, 2010) that the most important reason for the absence of a colour revolution episode in Tajikistan, when compared to Kyrgyzstan, related to a history of conflict and violence in response to past episodes of mass mobilisation in Tajikistan.

Formulating this argument in standard comparative terms, the independent variable (labelled in subsequent tables as IV) could be stated as the presence or absence of a civil war, with the dependent variable (labelled in subsequent tables as DV) being the presence or absence of a colour revolution event. Control variables (that are common to both countries) include the presence of elections that are considered to have been unfair (x1); the existence of a fourth wave pattern of similar contentious episodes likely to have similar impact on states in the region (x2); the existence of government efforts to suppress opposition (x3); similar socio-economic conditions faced by Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan when compared to other Central Asian states (x4); and similar levels of past socio-economic development, as measured by Human Development Indicators (both countries were classified as medium developed states, Tajikistan was ranked 122 of 177 in 2006, Kyrgyzstan ranked 110) (x5). Table 1 summarises this framework.

Table 1: Colour Revolution Comparison – Civil Wars

| Country | IV | Control Variables | | | | | DV |
|------------|-----------------------|-------------------|----|----|----|----|------------------------|
| Kyrgyzstan | Absence of civil war | X1 | X2 | X3 | X4 | X5 | Contentious episode |
| Tajikistan | Presence of civil war | X1 | X2 | X3 | X4 | X5 | No contentious episode |

Source: authors' compilation

¹¹ See Ó Beacháin and Polese (2010) for a more complete description of these events, particularly contributions by Isaacs (2010), Funagalli and Tordjman (2010), Lewis (2010), Ó Beacháin (2010) and Kevlihan and Sherzamonov (2010). While the situation in Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan remained calm, in the case of Uzbekistan, later protests and violence in May 2005, in Andijan, Uzbekistan were ruthlessly suppressed by the government there.

In utilising this comparative framework, it is important to note that it is not necessary (or even possible) to control for every single factor; rather it is only those factors considered to be theoretically relevant to the comparison at hand other than independent and dependent variables that should be controlled for.¹² The assumption of unit homogeneity is, therefore, a qualified one. Units, for the purposes of these small case comparisons, should be homogenous only where it counts.

Undoubtedly, there is something circular about this reasoning. In constructing our comparison, how can we be sure that we have controlled for all theoretically relevant control variables? The answer, of course, is that we cannot be sure. However, in the process of trying out such comparative models we can perhaps begin to further specify other important variables. Of course, we are also limited to a great extent by the facts of the natural experiment. Unlike laboratory scientists, we cannot re-run the experiment with modifications, but instead must either identify other past events that serve our purpose or wait for similar future events to unfold. New knowledge, therefore, inevitably comes from an iterative process that generates more convincing theories to be tested in future natural experiments or other comparisons. Such an iterative, theory-building perspective on qualitative comparisons of this nature is consistent with falsificationist perspectives on individual case studies.¹³ It is not, however, consistent with a strictly falsificationist approach to qualitative comparative analysis.

A second problem with this approach is the level of sensitivity required for control variables to be considered comparable. The framework above includes several binary variables – i.e. a measure of the presence or absence of civil war; existence of a fourth wave, existence of government efforts to suppress, etc. However, if it transpires that the strength / extent of a particular variable is important, the clean comparative framework set up above begins to fracture. To take one example, others have argued convincingly that the Akiev administration's ability to suppress opposition in Kyrgyzstan was fatally compromised in the run up to the colour revolution there (D. Lewis, 2010).¹⁴ As a consequence, the extent of government efforts to suppress opposition elements may have been insufficient, despite the existence of such attempts. This highlights an important point – Lewis's argument was based on a more detailed analysis of a single case included in our case comparison. This single case study highlighted the importance not of a new variable per se, but in how we measure that variable, and how (if at all) we should seek to control for that variable. If Lewis's (and related arguments set out in footnote 14) arguments are accurate, we can no longer argue in good faith that this variable is controlled for in this natural experiment. Under normal laboratory conditions, we would make the necessary re-calibrations and retest, but natural experiments do not afford us that luxury.

If we are to retain this comparison as a natural experiment (and not abandon it altogether), our only alternative is to re-specify the independent variable to something more focused on the credibility of the government's coercive response to colour revolution style events. This could include a history

12 To draw an analogy from the physical sciences, if we were testing the time taken by two apples to fall from a tree, we would presumably seek to vary one important characteristic that our theory tells us is important to determining the rate of fall – perhaps the height of the apple on the tree, while seeking to ensure that all other theoretically important characteristics of said apples are kept constant – their weight and aerodynamic characteristics, for example. While making no claims to expertise in theoretical physics, it seems reasonable to assume that the colour of said apples is not relevant in such circumstances and, therefore, does not necessarily need to be controlled for. However, one could think of other situations where the colour of comparable apples could be theoretically important – for example, when determining which one bruises more quickly. In this manner, the question we ask in conducting a comparison and the theoretical framework used to inform the comparison also create the structure that justifies the comparison. Of course, a good scientist would not just assume that the colour of an apple has no effect on its aerodynamic qualities but would, presumably, seek to verify through testing.

13 See for example, Gerring (2004).

14 The degree with which both states enacted authoritarian policies in advance of the elections also differed. Akaev's regime in Kyrgyzstan was more liberal and tended towards semi-authoritarianism, in Tajikistan Rahmon's regime tended and continues to tend towards a harsher form of authoritarianism. While Lewis (2010) focuses on the willingness of the security forces to suppress demonstrations, the difference may very well be broader than simply differences in the willingness of the security forces to do the regime's bidding. I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for highlighting this point.

Table 2: Colour Revolution Comparison – Coercive threat

| Country | IV | Control Variables | | | | DV |
|------------|--|-------------------|----|----|----|------------------------|
| Kyrgyzstan | Credible coercive response from the state (low) | X1 | X2 | X4 | X5 | Contentious episode |
| Tajikistan | Credible coercive response from the state (high) | X1 | X2 | X4 | X5 | No contentious episode |

Source: authors' compilation

of previous responses (as per the history of the incumbent regime in Tajikistan) and the degree of willingness / unwillingness of police forces to respond (as per the situation in Kyrgyzstan in 2005). The revised comparative framework, in such circumstances, would look as in Table 2.

Note that X3, the existence of government efforts to suppress opposition, has been removed in this revised framework, being 'absorbed' into the revised independent variable.¹⁵ Such comparative sleight of hand further highlights another problem with using this kind of comparison. Remember that, strictly speaking, theory creation should come in advance of theory testing following a strict falsificationist approach. However, from the beginning our comparison in this case has been informed by a degree of scholarly opportunism derived from our knowledge of conditions on the ground.¹⁶ This knowledge allowed us to identify the possibility that a natural experiment had occurred in early 2005 and to construct the comparative framework(s) that justified this experiment as such. However, reformulating our 'experiment' to make the design fit with the result is something that would blanch the face of a hard scientist and, presumably by extension, a strict falsificationist. Nonetheless, from a social science perspective I think that we have learned something from the exercise – both on the empirics of what may be most important to understanding the variation being considered and in better understanding potential limits of the dominant comparative paradigm.

Beyond the standard comparative approach?

The discussion above has, I hope, highlighted some potential utility of the dominant comparative approach, while also highlighting some potential limitations. In many respects the discussion above reflects, and draws from, an on-going and productive debate within political science that has been prompted by DSI. As Tannenwald (2007) notes, qualitative methods include a wide variety of logics of enquiry. DSI's unflinching 'homily' in support of methodological hegemony has not yet translated into actual hegemony and indeed has prompted fruitful exchanges and defences of different methodological approaches. Authors such as Brady and Collier (Brady & Collier, 2004; Collier, 1993) continue to argue for methodological diversity in research.

Other authors offer alternative means of comparison and research. To cite but a few alternatives among many, Charles Ragin (2000) has argued for a configurational approach to comparison, utilising the notion of 'fuzzy sets' rather than strict categorical differences, as a more effective means of comparison and analysis. Mahoney and Geertz (2004) present the notion of the possibility principle as a means of determining which 'negative' cases should be included in a qualitative analysis of

¹⁵ Were we to factor in the additional point made in footnote 14, the independent variable might be further refined to reflect both state capacity to suppress and the public context in which mobilisation can occur and would change to a strong versus weak enabling environment. One risk with this approach, however, is that in specifying our independent variable too broadly, we lose analytical focus.

¹⁶ To be clear, scholarly opportunism, in the view of this author, can be a good thing – the term is not used in a pejorative sense. Such an inductive approach is justified, because it is, after all, hard to say something about the world before we know something about that world (King, et al., 1994, p. 34).

particular social phenomena.¹⁷ Inspiration can also be drawn from classic theorists. The development of Weberian ideal types (Weber, 1949), for example, offers one means of distilling essential elements from multiple comparative examples in a way that maintains analytical rigour and provides important insights. One example of how this ideal typical approach has been advanced and applied in an explicitly comparative context can be drawn from the work of Charles Tilly and his collaborators (McAdam, et al., 2001) and is discussed further, for illustrative purposes, below.

Alternative comparative approach

In their 2001 book, entitled *Dynamics of Contention* (McAdam, et al., 2001), hereafter DoC, Doug McAdam, Sidney Tarrow and Charles Tilly sought to unite scholarship of social movements, revolutions, nationalism and democratisation by providing a single analytical framework to allow for potential synthesis among what are (at least nominally) distinct subfields. In doing this, the authors of DoC make claims to causal explanation that go beyond description to make causal claims based on an inductive theory-building process. Their work has important implications for research design. While typical comparisons in Central Asia often begin with the state as the unit of comparison, for example, DoC focuses on social and political processes as units of analysis. DoC also recognises the interrelatedness of social and political phenomena and does not require the notional construction of a closed analytical system of analysis with independent, control and dependent variables. Rather, it seeks to identify replicable patterns of social action that recur across social contexts. Such patterns are termed causal mechanisms (or causal chains comprised of multiple causal mechanisms). However, DoC's definition of causal mechanisms should be distinguished from the use of the same term in DSI-like approaches. For DSI and like-minded comparativists, a causal mechanism links an independent variable to a dependent variable and fleshes out why certain observable correlations occur. Causal mechanisms from this perspective convert observable correlations into defensible causations between independent and dependent variables.

For DoC, however, the focus of analysis is on causal mechanisms for their own sake. From this perspective, no variable is ever independent or entirely dependent. Conditions may differ, and outcomes may vary depending on circumstances, but certain social processes will repeat across very different contexts, but will nonetheless have observable causal effects. This perspective allows researchers to focus on social processes and, from a comparative perspective, to compare social processes across diverse cases.¹⁸

The comparison between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan began with several empirical observations – of the close proximity of electoral processes, the presence of a diffusion wave and the presence / absence of colour revolutions at the same time. These were inductive observations and deserve to be treated as such from the outset.¹⁹ There are a couple of ways in which we could potentially use concepts set out in McAdam et al (2001) to the case at hand. One could, for example, consider the mechanisms of diffusion of the colour revolutions concept. Sidney Tarrow (2005) has argued elsewhere that such an approach should focus on the role of 'rooted cosmopolitans' – activists that can act as knowledge brokers between the national and the international. While much of the literature on this topic has focused on civil society actors, it should be noted that states also learn from previous episodes

17 In the case of this study, the inclusion of Tajikistan and exclusion of other Central Asian states, such as Turkmenistan, from the analysis would fall into this category.

18 For one example of the application of this approach in designing a comparison of social processes in Tajikistan, Southern Sudan and Northern Ireland, see Kevlihan (2009, 2013).

19 This reflects a common process in social science analysis in asking 'What is the effect of X?', with a clear picture from the beginning of a Y outcome, though there is an absence of a strong theory to explain that outcome (Lieberman, 2005, p. 445). Neo-positivists might choose to describe this as descriptive inference, although DoC argument makes more generalised claims to explaining causation that neo-positivists have difficulty accepting.

elsewhere (Beissinger, 2007). Such double diffusion – of colour revolution methods and governmental strategies for the avoidance and prevention of such episodes may in part be a function of the nature of international politics in the states of Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union.²⁰

A focus on diffusion processes would, therefore, target its analysis on elite networks (Tansey, 2007). Process tracing based on elite interviews and archival/documentary reviews could provide the information needed to map out patterns of interaction and to identify and map the operation of causal mechanisms in each instance and across cases.

However, in the case of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, a focus on diffusion alone would not capture realities on the ground. Diffusion, while important in explaining processes of contentious politics during colour revolutions, only contributes to situations of collective mobilisation where conditions on the ground are relatively favourable. While external forces can persuasively explain the timing, if not the outcome, of political reform in relatively weak states (P. M. Lewis, 2002, p. 298), a focus on external forces alone ignores the salience of domestic conditions and the importance of interactive political and social effects related to these two interconnected fields in influencing dynamic political outcomes. It has been argued elsewhere, for example, that activists with international links played only a minor role in the colour revolution in Kyrgyzstan (D. Lewis, 2010), while domestic factors also played a pivotal role in making a colour revolution event less likely in Tajikistan despite prevailing international conditions (Kevlihan & Sherzamonov, 2010).

Explaining the colour revolution event in Kyrgyzstan in detail, therefore, could resemble descriptions on information exchange, mobilisation and brokerage described in McAdam et al (2001). In Tajikistan, the challenge is perhaps more difficult as it is essentially counterfactual, but would, from the opposition / civil society perspective, seek to identify situations where potential key brokers and mobilisers did not take on their potential roles. Comparisons in such circumstances need not necessarily be confined to the national level, but could also consider variations in mobilisation at the subnational / regional level and the networks that drove such local movements.²¹ To be complete, such an analysis would also need to look at relational dynamics between the state apparatus and civil society organisations. The role of the state in disrupting, fracturing and disabling activist networks while also reaffirming a willingness to respond with force is something that was noted with respect to the Tajik governments response to events in the region, for example (Robert Kevlihan & Sherzamonov, 2010). Actually conducting such an analysis is beyond the scope of this piece, but hopefully the discussion above provides interested researchers with an overview of one alternative approach to considering how to design, justify and defend comparative research designs beyond that laid out in DSI.

Conclusion

To conclude, I hope this paper has highlighted both some strengths and weaknesses of the dominant approach to comparison. The approach set out in *Design Social Inquiry* provides a useful framework for structuring thought experiments when scholars stumble across potential natural experiments and

20 Research on the diffusion of government strategies with respect to pension reform, for example, argues that peer to peer diffusion of preferred policies is stronger between states of the former Soviet Union than between OECD states (Brooks, 2005). The highlights an important possibility – the nature of international engagement between states (and civil society actors with transnational links) within the former Soviet space is of a different character than relations between these states and those outside the region. Ease of diffusion within former Soviet states may be facilitated in part by common (Russian) language links of elites dating from the Soviet era, and the on-going close interaction of states through existing institutional mechanisms such as the CIS and, in the case of Central Asia, the Shanghai Co-operation Organisation. For a good summary of literature on diffusion in international politics, see Dobbin et al. (2007); for further discussion of transnational activist networks see Keck and Sikkink (1998).

21 Analysis of earlier mobilisations in Tajikistan in pre- and early civil war period in 1991 and 1992 have followed this approach to some extent, in large part because of the distinctly regional nature of support for both sides in the civil war there. See, for example, Kilavuz (2009), and Kevlihan and Sherzamonov (2010, pp. 179-181).

indeed allows scholars to opportunistically identify events as such after the fact. It does not, however, lend itself well to theory testing in a strict falsificationist sense. While it may be that an enterprising researcher will develop a theory, anticipate a series of events in a region where the theory can be tested, determine an outcome and then ex-post verify that assumptions with respect to theoretically relevant controls remained valid throughout the time of the natural experiment, this seems like a lot to ask when considering most questions of interest to political scientists.²² Instead, in my view, the framework provided by *Designing Social Inquiry* should be treated as one useful tool among many in a researcher's toolkit – one that is useful for theory construction and indeed, for the advancement of knowledge, but not one that supersedes other fruitful comparative research approaches. As the discussion of the approach adopted in the book *Dynamics of Contention* highlights, alternative and defensible methods of determining and defending comparative research designs are available and can be equally fruitful to comparative researchers in moving beyond description to explanation while continuing to leverage the distinct skills and approaches that qualitative researchers can bring to the process of knowledge creation.

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22 It may be that elections related research could lend itself to this approach more than other questions, because of the iterative and predictable nature of these processes (at least in some regions), research questions would nonetheless have to be relatively narrow in scope to be able to credibly argue for comparison following strict falsificationist precepts.

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Robert Kevlihan is acting office director and senior program management specialist at USAID West Africa, based in Accra, Ghana. He has published single author and co-authored articles in a number of journals, including *International Studies Quarterly* (forthcoming), *Disasters* (forthcoming), *Nations and Nationalism*, *The European Journal of Development Research*, *Ethnopolitics*, *African Security Review* and *Irish Studies in International Affairs*. His first book, entitled *Aid, Insurgencies and Conflict Transformation, When Greed is Good* was published by Routledge in 2013, as part of their *Studies in Security and Conflict Management Series*. All views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and not those of any government, agency or organisation.